

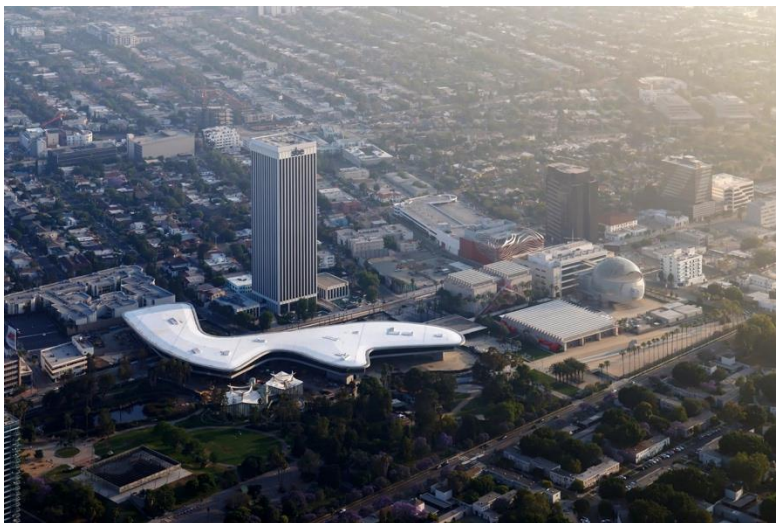
Arrivals and Departures

by Neil Goodman

I have always liked the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Located on Fairfax Avenue, adjacent to the La Brea Tarpit, the juxtaposition of multiple histories within proximity seemed just about right. The numerous LACMA exhibitions that I have seen over the years, both historical and contemporary, have always been thoughtfully curated, and beautifully installed. I also appreciated that there are multiple buildings, creating a museum campus. Both the Broad (BCAM) and Reznik Pavilion were designed by Renzo Piana, and the smaller Japanese museum, by Bruce Goff. The largest of the three is (BCAM) which both houses permanent and temporary exhibitions. BCAM also includes on the ground floor a monumental Richard Serra torqued ellipse, and across the corridor, Chris Burden's kinetic sculpture Metropolis 11.

Equally I was impressed that a "county" museum could create a world class collection, and it reaffirmed my feeling that LA had a separate and distinct identity independent of the rest of California. As a Giacometti fan, the installation in BCAM perfectly captures the work, and equally reaffirms how powerful sculpture can be seen in the right context.

In short, the LACMA seemed to have the right California vibe that fluidly moves you from indoor to outdoor space, and the multiple pavilions seem to embody the California mystique where the weather is always good, and the sun always shines.



(Left) Ariel view of LACMA's David Geffen Galleries along the Miracle Mile in Los Angeles. Photo: Iwan Baan. (Right) Peter Zumthor. Portrait by Anne Gabriel-Luergens, January 30, 2017.

New to LACMA, is the recent addition of the David Geffen Galleries. Almost twenty years in the making and at a cost of \$780 million, the Geffen is now the largest museum on the west coast. The new Geffen Galleries, designed by the Swiss Pritzker award winning architect Peter Zumthor, has four acres of outdoor space, 347,500 square feet of interior space, and twenty-six galleries. Additionally, the museum building spans over Wilshire Avenue. The Geffen Galleries also includes 155,000 objects, from ancient to contemporary. The collections and installations are organized according to oceans (Pacific, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian), as opposed to a more traditional art historical approach. The exhibition space is almost entirely located on the second floor of the building, with access through an adjacent staircase or elevator on the first floor. The structure is constructed entirely out of concrete, (ceiling, walls, floors, canopies, surrounding grounds). Large plate glass windows wrap the circumference of the Geffen, affording a cinematic view of the museum campus and adjacent roadway. Imbedded on the outdoor concrete pad surrounding the museum are the footprints of animals that had previously occupied that topography. Also, flanking the museum is a large modular Tony Smith sculpture, a Calder in the reflecting pool, a Jeff Koons topiary, and the museum's Cantor collection of Rodin sculptures.



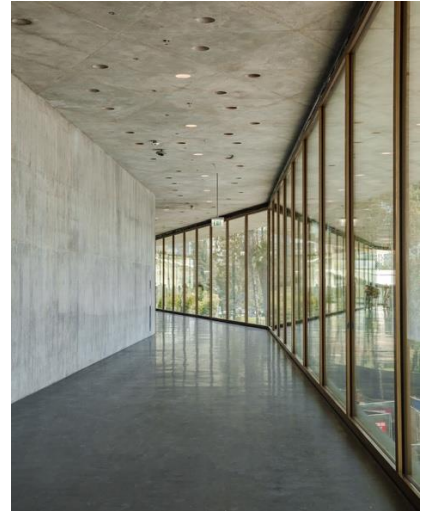
David Geffen Galleries at LACMA; exterior view from East West Bank Commons southeast toward Wilshire Boulevard with Tony Smith's *Smoke* (1967) in foreground, © Tony Smith Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo © Iwan Baan.

First impressions leave lasting impressions. Full disclosure was that I arrived at the museum for members night opening frustrated and tired after an arduous drive to LA from the central coast that took nearly double the expected time. So given my irritation with the traffic, arriving hungry and late, this was clearly not the perfect start to experience a new space. However, first thoughts carry their own weight, and mine was that the Geffen seemed dense, impenetrable, cumbersome and thick. A second visit, with more favorable driving circumstances, did little to change my initial impression, and unfortunately reinforced my first. My hope was that a project both this extensive and monumental would be a game changer, a new Guggenheim Bilbao, revitalizing both the way we see and experience art and architecture. If the museums aspirations were high, my response regarding the building (as opposed to the collection) was tepid for the following reasons:



(Left) David Geffen Galleries at LACMA with Tony Smith's *Smoke* (1967) in background, © Tony Smith Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo © Iwan Baan. (Right) LACMA Geffen Galleries curved overlook (2005). Photo by Clark Construction.

The Geffen was dramatically incongruent with the rest of the museum campus. Although uniqueness has its own rewards, the Geffen seemed more like an airport terminal that had arbitrarily landed next to a museum campus, (hence “arrivals and departures”). Spanning over Wilshire Boulevard, the architecture seemed to reference some of the least desirable aspects of LA urban life, including expressway overpasses. Perhaps if the Geffen had been perched high, the elongated concrete canopies and the building's stark brutalist architecture would have been less foreboding and more sheltering. Looking up, as opposed to across, would have been a significantly different experience, as space, placement, and viewpoint are strongly embedded in the way we view and respond to architecture.



(Left) LACMA Geffen Galleries interior gallery (2005). Photo by Clark Construction. (Right) LACMA Geffen Galleries windows from the interior (2005). Photo by Clark Construction.

Concrete: Unrelenting from beginning to end. Floors, ceilings and wall are cold and hard from top to bottom. You are encased in grayness. The only reprieve are the large plate glass windows which encircle the footprint of the Geffen's second floor. However, even they feel sandwiched and compressed when looking at the building outside, although they seem significantly different when viewed from the inside.



(Left) David Geffen Galleries. Installation view of the inaugural presentation. Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA. (Right) David Geffen Galleries. The inaugural presentation, corridor. Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA.

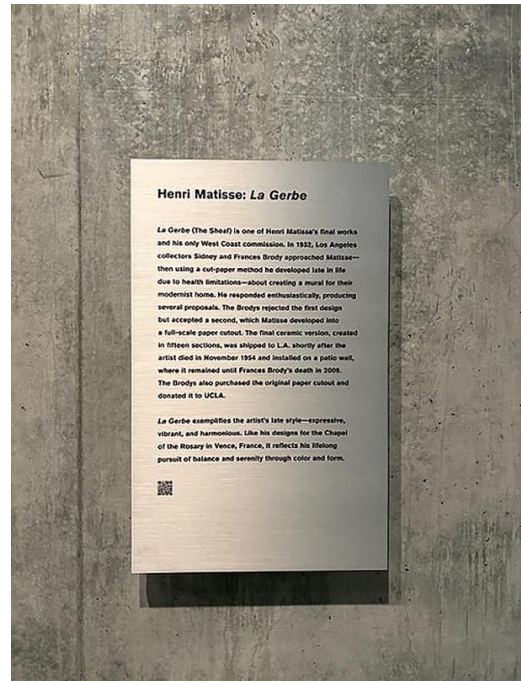
Lighting: Glaring and uneven. If the large plate glass windows allow natural light into the corridors, they create about the same amount of glare to illumination. Seemingly because of their orientation, large semi-transparent curtains shroud portions of the windows, while other sides are open. As a result, some objects and paintings are either dim, overly bright, or in the case of the large Francis Bacon Triptych, which is covered in glass, entirely reflective. The windowless interiors create an unsettling juxtaposition between the corridors adjacent to the bay windows and the darker interiors, forcing your eyes to move from natural to dropped cannister light. This problem permeates both the larger and smaller exhibition spaces and the corridors adjacent to those galleries.



David Geffen Galleries. Installation view of the inaugural presentation, gallery with blue walls. Photo: Museum Associates//LACMA.

Gallery spaces: Most have one entrance/exit. Galleries are often specific to a period or body of work; however, they are for the most part cavernous and oppressive. Although many of the smaller gallery spaces' concrete walls have saturated glazed color applied, they still seem unable to transcend their gloomy interiors. Like the rest of the Geffen, the

concrete walls, overwhelm much of the work, and with darkly colored painted walls, many of the works seem lifeless and flat. White walls would have been a much better companion for many of the paintings that are installed in the smaller galleries.



(Left) Matisse's *La Gerbe* (1953) in its new position at the LACMA Geffen Galleries. (Right) Wall text accompanying Matisse's *La Gerbe* at the LACMA Geffen Galleries. Courtesy The Museum Label Project.

Tiny wall text. Unless you have perfect vision, wall texts are hard to read. The font is unnaturally small and largely unreadable.



People attend a media preview of the new David Geffen Galleries at LACMA featuring display cases and table. Photo: REUTERS/Arafat Barbakh.

Odd juxtaposition of display cases. Most objects were encased in glass, and others entirely open and accessible. The museum stands (bases) were more typical of institutional biology tables as the linear table-like bases are cold and industrial and, unfortunately, used throughout the building. Some seemed purposefully askew, and others placed against the adjacent walls or in the middle of the corridors. Equally, sculptures were often affixed directly on the walls, with flat and frontal views. The installation seemed both incidental and intentional, juxtaposed between sprawl and order. For the most part the black steel display cases were largely inert, reinforcing, as opposed to softening, the surrounding architecture.



David Geffen Galleries interior corridor with exit sign. Photo: lacmaonfire.blogspot.com/.

Hard to navigate. The intention was to walk through the museum as if you were exploring objects without a tightly defined historical narrative or a clear navigational sense of direction. The downside of this, meant that you were constantly lost and unable to get your bearings. The Geffen's intent to enhance a sense of discovery, wandering and exploring the collection, was more unsettling than enticing, and the lack of clear exiting was surprising, considering the times that we live in.

In summary, I had a hard time warming up to the Geffen, and although many of the works are spectacular, my difficulty with the building often superseded the objects. However, my voice is one of many, with others equally applauding the brilliance and originality of the Geffen galleries, and the freshness of redefining how we view and interact

with objects within a museum space. Everything I disliked about the museum was liked by someone else, and so in this regard, there is certainly not a definitive conclusion. Whatever your feelings, it is a remarkably ambitious idea of what a museum can be, and if for me, it was a disappointment, for many others it is an epic achievement. Time is the best measure of success or failure, and the coming years will be the best indicators of how the museum matures, sustains, and nurtures an audience for future generations, and as they say in the artworld, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”.

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living on the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery and serving as the South-Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.